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ABSTRACT

A major survey of career and employment counseling in Canada was completed in 1993, with over 1600 counselors, department heads and managers of counseling centers, and regional directors working in career and employment counseling centers being polled. Survey results indicated: (1) there is a strong need for evaluation in all aspects of career counseling; (2) counselors face a number of challenges, such as dealing with client expectations and personal barriers, as well as their own stress and frustration; (3) clients know what they want from counseling, but their initial expectations undergo changes; (4) counselors need to examine how they spend their time; (5) there is a need for more effective leadership in the profession; and (6) counselors need to become better at marketing what they do. A call is made for a different model for delivering counseling services, moving away from ineffectual individual counseling and toward more group work, evaluation, mentoring, marketing services, and large-scale resource sharing. If counseling is to survive to service the clients who desperately need it, counseling will need to become truly client-centered, not program, or test, or counselor centered. (RB)

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An ERIC Digest

by Bryan Hiebert & Stu Conger

1995

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Career And Employment Counseling in Canada: The State Of The Art

Bryan Hiebert & Stu Conger

Overview

In 1993, a major survey of career and employment counseling in Canada was completed. Conger, Hiebert, and Hong-Farrell (1993) report the results of the survey in detail. Only highlights will be presented here. The survey report summarizes the responses of over 1600 counselors, department heads and managers of counseling centers, and regional directors working in career and employment counseling settings. The results have been presented at international, national, and provincial conferences of counselors, to career counseling practitioners, and to government officials. Generally, the reaction to the survey findings has been extremely positive and people are beginning to see ways to apply the results in their jobs. Therefore, it is timely to take stock of what we know about career and employment counseling in Canada.

Important Observations

There is a need for evaluation. The survey results tell us the following:

- Counselors do little evaluation of their work with clients; in some sectors 40% of counselors reported doing no evaluation of their work with clients.

- When evaluation is done, it tends to be with the client in the session, presumably by asking the client if the session was useful.

- Virtually no assessment is made of the impact of counseling on the client's presenting problem.

- Counselors seldom evaluate their programs with a view to improving them, and when such evaluation is done, clients are seldom consulted in the process.

The positive reaction to these findings suggests that counselors are beginning to see that without data to attest to their successes, they are vulnerable and that evaluation data may be part of the solution. However, few models exist for evaluating the actual effects of career and employment counseling, and managers and consultants do not place a high priority on evaluating counseling effects. Counselors and managers need leadership in developing and implementing new assessment models.

Career counseling is a complex task. The survey results revealed the following counseling challenges:

- Clients come to counseling with a variety of expectations.

- Client expectations change during counseling.

- Counselors who experience frequent changes in client expections have higher levels of stress and frustration.

- Generally, counselors report that their own stress and frustration levels are a barrier to client progress.

Counselors report that their clients also have other barriers. These include a lack of belief in self; low motivation to change; belief that potential for success is low; finances (especially for clients in colleges and CECs); family responsibilities (especially for clients in colleges); and unemployment (especially for clients outside the schools).

Thus the old adage "No career counseling problem is only a career problem" is verified. It will become increasingly important for counselors to address the obvious career-related problem within the context of the client's life if the career outcomes are to be realized.

Clients know what they want from counseling. Counselors report that their clients know what they want from counseling but that their initial expectations change after a few sessions. Specifically, counselors report that their clients come to counseling expecting the following: (a) information about career options, (b) information about training/educational options, (c) information about jobs available, (d) information about their interests and abilities (especially in schools and colleges), (e) to develop an appropriate career/employment action plan, (f) to become more motivated toward staying in school.

All of the above expectations decreased in importance after one or two sessions, presumably because these expectations had been met. On the other hand, some client expectations that were low priorities initially, later increased in importance. These included accepting responsibility for taking action, reducing employment barriers, becoming more motivated to seek work, increasing self-esteem inrelation to work, increasing capacity for self-direction (especially in high schools and community agencies), reducing self-defeating behaviors (especially in community agencies and CECs), and balancing work, family, leisure activities (especially in community agencies and CECs).

These findings provide further evidence of the increased complexity of career and employment counseling. Once clients' initial information needs are met, they move on to wanting to take action on the information they have received. Counselors should be prepared to work with clients to help the latter develop both sensible action plans and learn workable strategies for identifying and overcoming the barriers they face.

Counselors need to examine how they spend their time. Counselors report that career-related issues were the most fre-

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quently encountered main client presenting problem and also the most frequent underlying problem. Personal issues and education/training concerns were next on the list. Other underlying problems included family concerns (in the schools and colleges) and client skill enhancement (in the community agencies and CECs). However, when asked how they spent their time, counselors in school and colleges reported one-to-one personal counseling as the most common task. Preparing case notes and clerical tasks was identified as one of the five most time consuming tasks by 50% of counselors in some sectors. Working with third parties, coaching, mentoring, helping clients follow-through on an action plan occupied very little counselor time. Given the nature of the client problems and the types of client barriers, it may be that counselors are not apportioning their time in a manner that best meets clients' needs.

There is a need for more effective leadership. The survey identified that most counselors receive little support. They seldom get supervision or feedback on their work with clients, and when supervision does occur, it tends to focus on administrative matters. In some sectors counselors lack a good career resource library. Most counselors need a central office which develops new counseling methods and evaluation procedures, or provides other sorts of leadership like policy development and staff training. Counselors report wanting professional development/inservice in multi-cultural counseling, using labor marketinformation, using occupational information more effectively, employment counseling and rehabilitation counseling.

Counselors working in community agencies expressed the greatest need for training, likely because they were the most poorly educated of the sectors surveyed.

Counselors tend to feel isolated in their work and there are few senior organizational officials who provide support for them. There is a need for more effective leadership, and for the development of better leadership tools, so that counselors will receive the support they need to function effectively.

Counselors need to become better at marketing what they do. Counseling tends to be seen as an ancillary service, "bolted on to the side" of existing programs rather than as an integral part of service delivery. Counselors reported that their bosses and co-workers did not understand counseling concepts like case load, active number of clients, or amount and type of service a client receives. From 27% to 42% of counselors did not know to what extent their supervisors" expectations were being met. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, there is a risk that program administrators may assume that counseling is not necessary. Counselors need to become more active at marketing what they do and the results they achieve (i.e., the nature of service, nature of program, results of evaluation).

Closing observations

No one will deny that we live in an increasingly complex society where career problems are embedded in people's lives. Therefore, with most clients, counselors must address the total picture in order to be effective with the career counseling presenting problem. Clients expect this and that is why their expectations change during counseling.

We need to move to a different model for delivering counseling services. Individual counseling is ineffectual meeting the broad scope of client needs. More emphasis should be placed on group work, evaluation, mentoring, coaching, working with third parties, and marketing services. Further, all levels of an organizztion should be involved in determining client needs, planning programs to address those needs, and providing support to counselors in delivering services.

Counselors need more leadership if they are to function effectively. The federal department of Human Resources Development, and some provincial government departments, have provided leadership in developing good career information materials and new tools for use in career and employment counseling. This must continue. However, these materials should be marketed outside the departments that develop them in a more widespread sharing of information and resources, so as to avoid duplication and to make the materials more widely available to counselors, perhaps on some sort of cost-recovery basis.

A team approach to the delivery of career and employment counseling services is desirable, where team members are aware of what the other players are doing, yet focusing on their own role. Thus attempts to implement an evaluation model will need to be seen as supported and modeled at all levels in the organization, with supervisors sharing their evaluations with workers, district coordinators who model the new approach to managers, and so on. This will help to ensure an integrated approach to service delivery.

Conclusion

If counseling is to survive to service the clients who desperately need it, counseling will need to become truly client centered—not program, or test, or counselor centered. We believe that the data summarized here provide a good starting point for moving to the future.

References

Conger, D. S., Hiebert, B., & Hong-Farrell, E. (1993). *Career and employment counselling in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Labour Force Development Board.

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